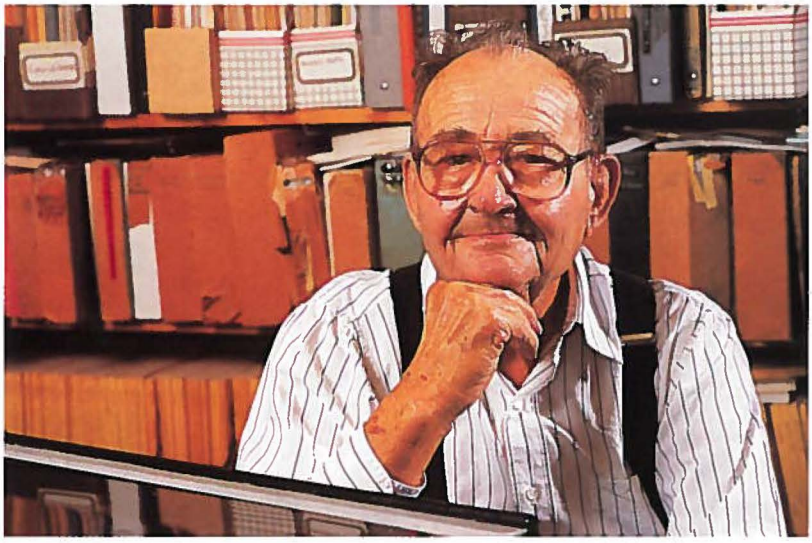
Coastal legend Henry Hildebrand dies

CORPUS CHRISTI — The quiet, constantly disheveled scientist who valued fieldwork more than books, discovered the fabled breeding grounds of the world's most endangered sea turtle and who conducted pioneering research on many facets of



Texas' unique marine environment is gone.

Dr. Henry H. Hildebrand III died here on August 14, five days short of his 81st birthday. Hildebrand was living in a nursing home at the time and had suffered a series of strokes. He also suffered from kidney ailments.

Close to 100 friends, family colleagues and former students gathered to celebrate Hildebrand and his life during a memorial service Sept. 12 at the Natural Resources Center on the Texas A&M-Corpus Christi campus.

Dr. Wes Tunnell, a friend and colleague of Hildebrand for more than 30 years, said the venue was the most fitting location to remember a man who founded the university's marine science program and whose research is still cited in scientific literature a half century after it was completed.

"I felt very obligated to do something for him," Tunnell said of the decision to hold a memorial service. "Interestingly, the family asked us if we would do something for him because the university was such a part of their life. They actually lived on campus when Henry began teaching here. There were two or three small wood frame houses back in the 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s that were left over from Navy days. They lived in one of those houses on the front of the island. His daughter and his son remembered very well their days in early life here on the island, so it meant a lot to them that we would put on a memorial service here."

Hildebrand's dress — often compared to that of a janitor — was a source of light humor for the legions of students he inspired. His ill-fitting slacks, misbuttoned shirts and tousled hair belied a razor sharp mind and vast intellect that allowed Hildebrand to speak at length about any number of topics.

"Henry is a classic example of the certifiable genius who does not care what people think of him or the way he dresses," Tunnell said in a profile of Hildebrand published in the Spring 2002 issue of *Texas Shores*."

Tunnell, director of the Center for Coastal Studies and associate director of the Harte Research Institute for Gulf of Mexico Studies, referred to Hildebrand as "the Neptune of the sea. He was like a walking encyclopedia of the ocean. He could talk about anything in the ocean."

Hildebrand conducted groundbreaking research on the Laguna Madre in Texas and Mexico — work that became the basis for most of the research that has been conducted by other scientists since then.

He also studied the shrimp grounds in the western Gulf of Mexico, harmful algal blooms, oil and tar on beaches, oyster shell dredging and saltwater dumping by oil companies into Texas streams.

Hildebrand's research was not limited to

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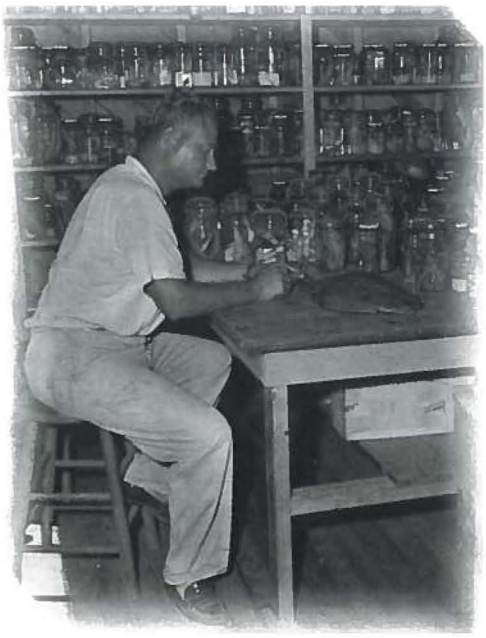

Henry Hildebrand in a lab at The University of Texas Marine Science Institute in 1955.

Texas or even the United States. He studied the king crab fishery in the Bering Sea and the cod fishery at Ungava Bay in Québec, and his trips to Mexico and Central America were legendary.

One of his greatest accomplishments was finding the nesting beach of the Kemp's ridley sea turtle at Rancho Nuevo, in the Mexican state of Tamaulipas. For decades the nesting habits of the smallest and most endangered sea turtle had been a scientific mystery.

"I spent considerable time searching for that beach in Veracruz and Tamaulipas," Hildebrand told *Texas Shores* in 2002.

Henry Hildebrand was born in Fowler, Kan., to a high school teacher and a teacher-turned-housewife. From the time he entered high school, Hildebrand was interested in zoology and fisheries because of the influence of his uncle, Samuel Hildebrand, who is considered one of the greatest ichthyologists ever produced by this country.

Hildebrand received a bachelor's degree in zoology from the University of Kansas and a master's degree in fisheries from McGill University in Montreal. He moved to the coastal bend of Texas to work on his Ph.D. at The University of Texas Marine Science Institute. He received his doctorate in 1954 and called the area his home until his death.

Hildebrand's passion for hands-on teaching in the field remains the model used for the curriculum at Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, which was the University of Corpus Christi when he began teaching there in the mid-1950s. Through his approach to biology, Hildebrand heeded the call of 19th Century Swiss scientist Louis Agassi: "Study nature, not books."

"I credit him with being the one who started the marine science program on this island in 1957," says Tunnell. "We owe our legacy to him. He developed a hands-on, field marine biology program. We continued to pattern that when I came in here in 1974 and still today our fame is this hands-on, get-out-in-the-field approach to marine science. Henry started that.

"For our university, his passing is a real milestone," Tunnell said. "He donated his entire library to the university. It filled about four rooms and five closets in his house."

Hildebrand's writings, notebooks and collections will be housed in the university's archives, while most of his books and journals will go to the Center for Coastal Studies and the Harte Research Institute.

His remaining books will be given to Mexico and most likely shared between coastal universities in the states of Tamaulipas, Veracruz and Campeche.

"One of his passions was trying to help out people in Mexico," said Tunnell.

A scholarship fund honoring Hildebrand that was established a couple of years before his death recently achieved "endowed" status. Anyone wishing to contribute to the fund can do so by making checks payable to Texas A&-Corpus Christi and mailing them to the Dr. Henry H. Hildebrand III Scholarship Fund, c/o Dr. Wes Tunnell, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi, 6300 Ocean Dr., Corpus Christi, TX 78412.

For more information, contact Gloria at (361) 825-2736.

'We owe our legacy to him'

PHOTO COURTESY OF MRS. GABRIELLE HILDEBRAND